

2017

## Moving across Spaces

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### Recommended Citation

Djoulakian, Hasmik (2017) "Moving across Spaces," *Intertext*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 22.  
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol25/iss1/22>

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*Moving across spaces*  
hasmik djoulakian



I clutch a quarter in my right fist and an overripe banana in my left. My palms are slick and sweaty from the heat, the salty moisture drawing out the sickly-sweet smell of copper from the coin. I raise the coin to my face and the smell hits my nose and coats the insides of my nostrils and throat. I stretch out my fingers and look down at the warm metal centered in my palm, feeling its weight, losing myself for a moment in its circular heartbeat. Holding it, I feel like there is potential and possibility—I can do something with it, transform it.

My mother stands at the register inside the liquor store. Several years later, the store will be renamed “Hammered Liquor”—complete with a large image of a hammer next to a heavyset font—but today, its tall gray letters indicate it is the community corner store. It is neighbored by a mechanic shop and a parking lot full of oil stains that I think of as lava puddles to hop over. My mother chides me if I step in them, but I am not good at doing what I am told. She does not want me to track the oil into the house, but I wonder what patterns and images I could make with the oil-soaked rubbery treads on the bottoms of my shoes.

Across the street are clothing shops and a sign with two stick figures holding each other that reads “Safe Place.” I wonder what makes a space safe—what makes this space safe? Is it having someone to hold you?

Inside the store, I stare at the columns of colorful, small rectangles dangling from long, flimsy pieces of string from the top of a metal rack behind the register. Each one has an image of a national flag or someone smiling while talking on the phone. They are decorative additions to the gray landscape of the liquor store, which sells everything from cigarettes to laundry detergent to less-than-fresh fruits. The grapes have fruit flies hovering above them, staking their claim to the sugary bounty. My mom will sometimes

buy last-minute items from here, such as flour, sponges, and milk, when she does not have the time for the mile-long walk to the grocery store.

“I’ll have that calling card,” my mother says as she points to the reddish-green one. Her Armenian pronunciation of the word stresses the *a* in *call* as an *o* and the *d* in *card* as a *t*. The cashier, who owns the shop with his son, is in his sixties and has fine blonde hair that is thinning from his forehead back. He is a short man with sun-darkened skin and two visible silver additions to his teeth. He has an easy, thin smile when he looks at me, which later makes me think he was fond of me because he may not have had any grandchildren of his own. Some weeks later, he offers me a swirly piece of black licorice. It is the first piece of licorice I have ever tried, and I nibble and lick it slowly, contemplating whether I like the taste. I am often not sure if I like the taste or feel of something, and the licorice feels cloyingly sweet, like medicine.

He hands my mother the calling card as she fishes in her purse for a purple coin pouch, bordered in lime green with an image of Tweety’s bright yellow face on either side. She unzips the pouch slowly—it is bulging and won’t open easily—and dumps dozens of dimes, quarters, and nickels into her palm, counting out five dollars’ worth and placing the coins in neat stacks on the glass counter.

The white inside of the coin pouch has grayed from years of holding coins. He waves my mother away when she tries to pay for my banana. I look at the banana nervously, worried that my possession of the freckly fruit has caused problems. I look for images in the brown spots as I slide away from beside my mother and place my sweaty quarter into a vending machine coin slot. I twist the cool metal handle to release a shiny, yellow rubber ball. I turn it over in my hands and trace my finger along the raised line around the middle of the ball, thinking about how it was made.



Kinetic energy stirs in her breath as she deftly dials the long strings of numbers she reads from the card. The first two combinations access the calling card system, and an automated voice instructs her to enter the number she is trying to contact. That one she has long committed to memory.

The noises of my mother and grandmother's conversation feel orange, bright and heavy with an aching desire to hear every dip and catch in each other's voice. Those lilt suggest laughter or sadness and are as close to images of each other as they can get. My mother begins to ask how my grandmother's students are behaving, which makes me think my grandma has been feeling frustrated with the first-graders' behavior. She has been an elementary school teacher for nearly thirty years, and her energy has begun to dwindle.

"Maybe you can have a card system—green, yellow, and red cards. The red is if they behave really badly. That's how they do it at Haso's school."

I perk up a bit upon hearing my name.

My mother cups her hand around her mouth as she speaks louder into the large gray phone. *Dora the Explorer* is playing quietly on the 12-inch television resting on a brown chair behind the door, next to my books and a Wile E. Coyote stuffed animal.

"Haso started first grade the other week. You got the photo I mailed to you? The one with her wearing the blue Scooby-Doo shirt and her hair in braids? I love that one, too."

I am sitting on my bed and watching the show absently while tossing my yellow ball from one hand to the other. I hold it in one hand for so long that I almost forget it is there and play a guessing game with myself, pretending I don't know which hand has the ball. It becomes part of me, its presence no longer felt. The heat from my hand seeps

into the ball, and it no longer feels like there is anything in my hand.

"Mom? Mom. Mom? Mom?"

She says the word as a question, a plea, as if her voice can force the connection to improve. It is ten o'clock in the evening, and my mother's back is pressed against the brown-and-black ornate rug draped on our bedroom wall. Her legs are stretched out in front of her, and she reaches down every few minutes to scratch them, because they itch from shaving. She scratches until her legs turn red, and tiny spots of blood appear against her pale skin. My mother's golden-red curls are wild around her face, some strands turning gray at the roots, and her forehead is creased. Her cheeks are flushed with rosacea and anxiety, and she is wearing the tangerine towel robe she brought with her from Armenia. Her tiny silver cross hangs just above her collarbone.

I have moved on to arranging and rearranging the stickers in one of my sticker books. The crescent moon does not belong with the tiger anymore, so I move it to the previous page next to the ballerina slippers that remind me of the ones I hope to have someday.

My mother wants so badly to hear her mother's voice, ask how her father is, or if her brother has found a job, but she can only discern every other word, and the calling card expires after an hour and a half. It is a countdown to silence. Later, I will wonder what it must have been like to keep track of the minutes she spent talking to her family, stopping a conversation short to say goodbye if she heard the ding that indicated the call would drop in one minute. Time is a privilege in diaspora.

But today, I think of what my grandmother might look like. I have seen photos of her, of course—my mother has a passport-size photo

in her purse and larger ones in the photo albums boxed up in the closet. I know my grandmother has silver hair that she pulls up into a neat bun. She wears light pink lipstick, soft traces of rouge, and mascara. She is not a wealthy woman by any means, as most people in Armenia are either extremely rich or extremely poor.

But I wonder what my grandmother looks like right at this instant, 10 a.m.—is she sitting at her kitchen corner, hair disheveled from bed, comfortable in her pajamas and ready to begin the day? I wonder if she is hopeful or if she wants to go back to bed.

There is no coherence when you live on the other side of the world from your loved ones. The longing between my mother and her family grows large and thickens. It becomes a weight in her voice and makes her shoulders sag. Time warps in strange ways. Days feel endlessly long, but years pass without her realizing it, because she has become accustomed to the heartache like someone might become accustomed to less oxygen in the air. They would take more shallow breaths and move around less in the thinner air. Eventually, they would forget what it felt like to fill their lungs completely.

I study the black numbers on the calling card resting in my mother's lap like they are a script with hidden meanings. She lowers her hand and anxiously bends the card, folding and unfolding it along its center until the numbers become frayed. She has a pile of similar, wrinkled calling cards hiding under the bed. They no longer seem decorative like they did when they were strung up in the liquor store. Now, they are a reminder of hastened and cut-short conversations. Sometimes, when she doesn't have enough money to purchase a new one, she calls those old numbers and asks the operator to activate the card for a few minutes. Sometimes they agree. They must hear the ache in her voice.

Static cuts in and out of her conversation.

"So how are you, Mom? Are you doing well?"

Years later, I wonder how honest she was with my mother. Exchanging pleasantries is so much easier when there is so much distance and static clouding the conversation. At least my mother was able to remind herself later that her mother did, in fact, say she was doing well. The words crossed the space between them. It wasn't enough, but maybe she even believed her.

Years later, as an adult in college, I find myself regressing to pleasantries with my mother over the phone when the missing grows too large between us. It is not the same as living in diaspora, of course. That kind of disconnection is geopolitical, its physical borders creating layers of impenetrability. The emotional disconnection follows suit.

In some ways, it hurts more now, but at least I understand my body and its spatial and emotional dimensions better. In high school, when I did not fully know what "diaspora" meant, the sense of disattachment made me want to disconnect altogether.

My grandmother pulls a four-inch long, bulky silver recorder out of her cherry brown wardrobe. She shuts the door to the wardrobe tightly and with a sense of deliberation, like she wants everyone to know she found what she was looking for.

"Mm-hm," she says under her breath. This sound loosely means "there we go" or "I accomplished what I set out to do."

She shuffles over to where I sit on her bed, her open-toed slippers making soft noises as they graze against the carpet on her bedroom floor. There are carpets everywhere in the house, even some that sit on top of other carpets. They belonged to my great-



grandparents, or have at least been in the family for a few decades, maybe from when my grandfather had a good job as a food inspector during the Soviet Union. The cherry brown piano matches most of the furniture.

The comforter in my grandmother's room has beads woven into it, so my grandmother gave me a soft blanket to lay on top of it before I took my nap. She also gave me her hand fan, and I laid spread eagle on her bed waving it in front of my face, beads of sweat rolling down between my breasts. The air is so hot and stagnant that moving makes it harder to breathe. We usually sit or lie down, waiting for night to bring some cool relief. My grandfather is sitting in front of the television, his white hair, thick for a man in his 70s, rustles in the breeze from the black fan my mother bought days ago. The relentless laugh track from the television show makes my mind feel numb.

My grandmother scoots next to me on the bed and shows me the recorder.

"Your mother sent this to me when you were just three years old."

I look at the recorder and try to remember if I have any memory of the thing. I don't.

"She recorded you reciting a poem about bunnies. Do you remember that one? It's the one in Russian, and you get some of the words wrong in it because you were so little."

I did remember that poem. My grandmother fiddles with the recorder for a minute but can't get it to play. All we hear is a soft click and a moment of static.

"Can I try?"

I hold down the play button until we hear the recording of my cheery childhood voice.

We hear my three-year-old self recite a Russian poem about a hunter who thinks he killed a bunny, but later realizes it is still alive. My family has only one home video, so hearing the recording of myself from a young age stored in such a physical, tactile, and weighty object is a strange and nice feeling. It

is like that moment in time from so many years ago was captured and stored in the small gray machine. My mother recorded it, put it in a box, and shipped the box across the world, where it reached my grandmother, who played it over and over until the batteries died. She then replaced the batteries and tucked the recorder into her closet.

My voice traveled across spaces that I was unable to cross as a child. My mother sent part of herself—the sound of her child's voice—across spaces that she was barred from crossing, because of her undocumented status. This makes me sad—but also proud of my mother—that she was able to find ways to maintain her sense of hope, resistance, and connection with her family.

I stop the recording when I hear the sound of my cousin Becky playing outside. She has climbed the gray ladder next to the outdoor bathroom to peek inside through the small window.

"What are you doing in there, Auntie?" she asks my mother in Armenian with a giggle in her voice. My mom feigns shock and is rewarded with Becky's peppered laughter. She reminds me of myself at her age because I would climb the stair railing in our apartment from all angles, then jump down onto the couch, table, my mother—whatever or whoever stood below me. My grandmother thinks she looks like a wild child with her hair in disarray, tiny frame, shirtless, and dirty feet, shoeless. She scolds her for climbing the ladder, but I think she looks like a nimble sprite, her head nearly touching the green grapes hanging low from the lattice patchwork that goes across the backyard. Becky loves those grapes. She will lie on the couch, right leg swung over left knee, and eat them slowly, looking like a tiny queen with her jaw bones set squarely.

I hold my leap frog globe in my pudgy five-year-old hands, gripping the attached green pen harder than I need to, with four of my fingers wrapped around it like I might try to stab away at something. I like to spin the globe around as fast as I can, close my eyes, and stop its revolutions with my index finger. Wherever my finger points, I click there with the pen and learn its name, imagining what someone my age might be doing there at that very moment.

I spin the globe around slowly and stop near the giant land mass that is Russia. I tap on Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, and finally spot Armenia. I click on it with my pen, wondering what the country's name will sound like as pronounced with the disembodied voice of my leap frog globe.

"Please tap only one location," I hear the voice say. I try again, looking at the round metallic tip of the pen and aiming deliberately—slowly—at the tiny speck on the plastic surface.

"Please tap only one location," the voice repeats. I try once more, a staccato of a tap, only to hear the same message.

This was my first experience with disappearing, even if I didn't know it at the time.

Growing up, I did not feel any attachment to Armenia. I had no desire to develop the kind of gnawing missing my mother has carried with her for twenty-one years. It will be a continuous, lifelong process to see myself in relation to Armenia on my own terms.

"That's good. Yes, I'm doing well, too. Yes, yes. Haso is great, she's right here next to me," my mother says as she smiles in my direction.

I smile back and go over to curl up next

to her. My mother hands me the phone, and I shyly say hello to my grandmother, whose voice rises sweetly. She and my mother speak a few times a month, and she is emotional over the changes in my voice. It feels strange to be so loved and recognized by someone I hardly know. I stare at the calling card, reading the numbers in my head and murmuring yes and no in response to her questions about school until she releases me.

I hand the phone back to my mother who assures my grandmother that she will take care of herself. She has always been good at doing what she is told, but I know she is lying. There are some things she cannot control, and her sadness is one of them.

She says goodbye. The moon glow shines through the open window from behind the neighboring apartment complex. I think to myself that, even if we can't see my grandmother, at least the three of us get to look at the same moon every night, and at least it always seems to be in the same place.

